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ROMAN CATHOLIC MORAL THEOLOGY.

BY J. W. POYNTER.

THE recent pronouncements of the Lambeth Conference, on some controverted points of morality, have given rise to a good deal of discussion. In some quarters there is a disposition to suggest that some of those decisions compare unfavourably with the more fixed and uncompromising teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. It may be well, therefore, to devote an article to examining the basis and to some extent the superstructure of the moral theology of that Church. Of course, in a brief article only an outline can be attempted; but it may be possible to make that outline useful as giving an accurate idea of the whole of a vast subject. Let it also be understood once for all that this article is not "an attack." It aims only at giving informative statements.

As one of the first essentials to any discussion is to have a careful definition of the words we use, so we must here define clearly what we mean by "morality," "ethics," "moral philosophy," and "moral theology." "It is necessary," says *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* (x, 559), "at the outset to distinguish between morality and ethics: terms not seldom employed synonymously. Morality is antecedent to ethics: it denotes those concrete activities of which ethics is the science." "Moral philosophy" is another term for "philosophical ethics," and (*Cath. Ency.*, v, 556): "Ethics may be defined as the science of the moral rectitude of human acts in accordance with the first principles of natural reason." "Moral theology," on the other hand, (*Cath. Ency.*, xiv, 601), "includes everything relating to man's free actions and the last, or supreme, end to be attained through them, as far as we know the same by Divine Revelation." Thus, ethics is the natural science of which morality is the art; and moral philosophy and moral theology are the natural and the supernaturally revealed (respectively) doctrines of ethics and morality.

The whole outlook of the Roman Catholic Church on these subjects, as on all others, is, of course, dominated by that Church's claim to be the one authentic and infallible teacher of religious knowledge. "The Eternal Pastor and Bishop of our souls, in order to continue for ever the lifegiving work of His Redemption, determined to build up a holy Church, wherein, as in the house of the living God, all believers might be one in the bond of one faith and one charity": (Vatican Council, constitution *Pastor Aeternus*). "The Church cannot err in what she teaches as to faith or morals, for she is our infallible guide in both": (English Roman Catholic Catechism, question 100).

It would thus at first sight seem that Roman Catholics have a fixed and certain guide to their moral actions, such as cannot be possessed by people who do not believe in an infallible Church.

On closer inspection, however, that fixity and certainty turn out to be to a great extent apparent rather than real.

First of all, precisely to what facts and doctrines does the infallibility of the Church extend? The Vatican Council defined the Papal infallibility as existing "when he [the Pope] speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when in discharge of the office of pastor and teacher of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the Church universal"; and it stated that that infallibility was the same as that "with which the Divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed for defining doctrine regarding faith or morals." It did not, however, give any precise criterion as to when that infallibility exists, and Roman Catholic theologians are still divided on that essential question. In his recent book, *The Vatican Council*, Dom Cuthbert Butler dwells candidly on those diversities, and, referring to Cardinal Manning, says (pp. 215-16):

"In his elaborate explanation of the force of the infallibility decree he extends its scope so as to include dogmatic facts, censures less than heresy, canonizations of saints, approbations of religious orders: all this is roundly asserted; even though Bishop Gasser, as official spokesman of the deputation *de Fide*, had laid down positively that the theological questions at issue over these matters were not touched by the definition, but were left in the state of theological opinion in which they were before the Council—and still are."

True, Dom Butler says that Papal utterances, even when not certainly infallible, are to be accepted. "Such adhesion to teaching not infallible is not the firm assent of faith, but a prudent assent based on a moral conviction that such teaching will be right" (p. 226). What, however, does that mean? If the teaching is not infallible, it is not revealed by God: for God cannot err. Therefore, such teaching is merely human. In that case, we should be free to receive or reject it on its merits. The only "prudent assent" we can be obliged to give it is a respectful regard to the authority of those teaching it: but that regard must be conditioned by the fact that they are merely fallible men. In short, we should be free to reject it if, after candid and respectful study, we find the evidence to be against it.

The infallibility of the Pope and Roman Church, then, is really very uncertain. If that is so even in dogmas of faith, how much more so in matters of morals—which concern the interminable complexities of human thoughts and acts all the world over day by day!

Take the question of birth control. Cardinal Bourne, speaking at Swansea on October 5, 1930, alluded to the Lambeth Conference's declaration on that subject, and described it as "this really destructive resolution," which has created "intense surprise and real scandal." He said it "abandons the unbroken traditional Christian teaching," and "the prelates who adopted this resolution have abdicated any claim which they may have been thought to possess to be authorized exponents of Christian morality." He then added that "the teaching of the [Roman] Catholic Church on

this subject" is "binding on the conscience of every man and woman."

From this one would suppose that that teaching has been definitely and infallibly set forth. That, however, is not the case. No *ex cathedra* decree of a Pope, or of an Ecumenical Council, exists on the subject. All that exist are theologians' opinions, as to which the highest that can be said is that Roman Catholics should give them the "prudent assent" referred to above. How can teaching be "binding on the conscience of every man and woman" when it has not been infallibly declared? Moreover, the teaching in question is not so unanimous as Cardinal Bourne suggests. On this subject it is useful to read *The Morality of Birth Control*, by "A Priest of the Church of England" (London: Bale and Danielson, 1924). Dealing with Roman Catholic teaching on these matters, the author shows (pp. 75, 161-2) that it is logically inconsistent; that (pp. 55-6) one chief argument in it is based on a textual error in Bible-interpretation; that (p. 91) it involves grave evils of its own; and that (pp. 76, 158-9) in fact it allows some contraceptive methods. To sum up this matter, then: Roman Catholic teaching on contraception is far from as clear as it is generally thought to be; and, in any case, it is open in some respects to serious moral objections; while at very best it is non-infallible, and therefore no Roman Catholic can be sure (even on his own grounds) that it may not be wrong. Whatever our opinions on this perplexing question may be, then, it is a fact that Rome has no real logical advantage over Lambeth. Indeed, in reality, Roman Catholic current teaching is inferior to that of Lambeth in one respect at least: although Roman teaching is non-infallible on this matter, the Roman clergy are binding their people to it on pain of mortal sin. Is that not a grave excess of jurisdiction? In this article I express no opinion on birth control itself; I merely challenge the current Roman Catholic assumption of superiority.

A similar assumption of superiority is made in regard to Roman Catholic teaching as to marriage itself. The Council of Trent (session 24) declared that matrimony "is to be numbered among the sacraments of the New Law"; and it passed the canon saying: "If anyone saith that matrimony is not truly and properly one of the seven sacraments of the evangelical law, instituted by Christ the Lord, . . . let him be anathema."

Certainly, at first sight it would seem that a teaching which says marriage is one of Christ's sacraments must be superior to teaching which says it is not. It is dangerous, however, to trust too readily to first appearances. What, in Roman Catholic teaching, is a sacrament? There are (Trent, session 7, canon 1) seven sacraments; they (canon 8) confer grace "through the act performed" (*ex opere operato*); to their proper administration "the intention at least of doing what the Church does" is necessary (canon 11). In regard to matrimony, it is distinctly laid down (Trent, sess. 24, canons 3, 4, and 12) that the Church can dispense from some degrees otherwise prohibitory of marriage, and establish others; that it is

heresy to say "that the Church could not establish impediments dissolving marriage, or that she has erred in establishing them"; and that it is heresy to say, "matrimonial causes do not belong to the ecclesiastical judges."

In declaring matrimony a Christian sacrament, therefore, what the Roman Church is really saying is this: that matrimony is a means by which grace is received *ex opere operato*; that the rules of its reception are subject to the legislation of the Roman Church; and that that Church can vary those rules. To say the least, it by no means follows that that teaching is morally superior to teaching which says that Divine grace may be received by any person who is married according to the laws of his or her country and remains faithful to the obligations thereof. Indeed, the Roman teaching introduces positive elements of harm. The *Ne Temere* decree of 1907 declares that any so-called marriage, both or one of the parties to which is a Roman Catholic, is null and void if not contracted according to the laws of the Council of Trent; and it is definitely added that

"the above laws are binding on all persons baptized in the Catholic Church and on those who have been converted to it from heresy or schism (even when either the latter or the former have fallen away afterwards from the Church), whenever they contract either betrothal or marriage with one another."

The possibilities of misery, breaking up of families, and bastardization of children, involved in such legislation, are obvious: especially when the clause about those who "fall away from the Church" is understood—for the clause applies to people baptized Roman Catholics as babies though afterwards never brought up as such. Finally, we must note that, by claiming right to impose or remove impediments as she sees well (irrespective of civil laws), the Roman Church introduces a grave source of confusion and even moral abuse. On the whole, the Roman teaching on matrimony cannot rightly claim any moral or religious superiority over teaching which says God's blessing is not conditioned by ecclesiastical regulations. (*N.B.*—It should be noted that the *Ne Temere* decree does not affect marriages to which neither party is a Roman Catholic. The decree says: "Non-Catholics, whether baptized or unbaptized, who contract among themselves, are nowhere bound to observe the Catholic form of betrothal or marriage." This mitigation, however, does not do away with the other evils.)

To turn to other aspects of Roman Catholic moral theology: One of the most important elements in it is the distinction between "mortal" and "venial" sins.

"Mortal sins are against the very end of the Law, which is the love of God; they utterly destroy charity and grace, cause the death of the soul, and deserve eternal punishment. Venial sin, though it disposes to that which is mortal, and is the greatest of all evils except mortal sin, still does not annihilate the friendship of the soul with God. Venial sin is a disease of the soul, not its death, and grace is still left by which the sin may be repaired." (*Addis and Arnold, Catholic Dictionary, 1917, p. 777*).

It is not needful in this article to go into the merits of this distinction. The object now in view is to examine the assumption that (even granting its own premisses) Roman Catholic moral theology is socially or/and individually more beneficial than that of "non-Catholics." In that connection, what has to be realized is that the distinction between mortal and venial sins is often the reverse of clear.

"It is very hard to decide in particular what is or is not mortal sin. . . . Some sins, such as those of blasphemy, perjury, impurity, are, if deliberate, always mortal; others—e.g. theft—though mortal in their own nature, are venial if the amount of the wrong done is very small. Others, again, are venial in their own nature, and become mortal only under superadded circumstances." (Addis, *Catholic Dictionary*, p. 777).

Surely, no Protestant system of moral teaching can be more full of uncertainty than this; yet this is part of the very basis of Roman moral theology as regards directing consciences.

Every Roman Catholic priest will be aware of the problem of "scruples." Confessors find "scrupulous persons" one of the most troublesome features of their ministry. "Scrupulous persons" are those who worry unduly over their sins or the nature of those sins. "Scrupulosity, in general, is an ill-founded fear of committing sin," said the late Father Wm. Doyle, S.J. (*Scruples*; "Irish Messenger" Office, 1928, p. 1). Such persons torture themselves as to whether this or that is a sin; whether, if so, it is mortal or venial; whether their previous confessions have been bad and therefore invalid; in short, such persons "do not know where they are."

"Scrupulosity," said Father Doyle (p. 3), "completely warps the judgment in moral matters. It takes away one's common sense. It places before the eye of conscience a magnifying glass, which enlarges the slightest cause of alarm, and makes a timid soul see a thousand phantom sins, whilst by specious reasoning it seeks to persuade it that these are undoubted faults."

"A scrupulous man," said the late Father F. W. Faber (*Growth in Holiness*, 1872, p. 315), "teases God, irritates his neighbours, torments himself, and oppresses his director." Yet, after all, is not this disease of "Scruples" a natural product of a system of compulsory auricular confession of which a great part is the habit of analysing sins so as to distinguish between mortal and venial? In any case, all this does not testify to any pre-eminent moral or spiritual *certitude*!

A further element of uncertainty, in Roman Catholic moral theology, is found in the discussions about "probabilism" and its rival theories. Probabilism teaches that, when there are opposed opinions as to the rightness or otherwise of an action, the opinion may be followed which, after inquiry, seems best, even though it is doubtful. In short, a "probable opinion" is one for which some reputable authority can be quoted. It may be adopted even if other authorities differ. The "probabiliorists" (= "advocates of the *more probable* view"), on the other hand, hold that that view ought to be followed which has *the greatest weight* of evidence. The

history of these theories has shown striking vicissitudes. To quote Addis and Arnold (*Cath. Dict.*, p. 605) :

“ From 1580 till about 1650 Probabilism, as even Billuart does not venture to deny, held possession of the schools. . . . From about 1650 a powerful reaction set in. In France, Zaccaria writes, Probabilism was hated as ‘ the pest of morality. . . . ’ Nor must it be thought that this hostility was peculiar to French ecclesiastics or to Gallicans. Most, according to Billuart, of the Dominicans, some distinguished Jesuits (*e.g.* Gonzalez, general of the Society), and many Italian writers (*e.g.* the Dominican Concina, the brothers Peter and Jerome Ballerini, Berti, Fagnanus, many years secretary of the Congregation of the Council) were in the hostile ranks. [Pope] Benedict XIV made the moral theology of the Jesuit Antoine (in the Roman edition of the Franciscan Carbognano)—an author rigid among the Probabiliorists—the textbook at the Propaganda [College]. . . . The proportion is now reversed, and Probabilism is the popular theory throughout the Church. It may, indeed, be regarded as the only existent theory.”

Be it remembered that these questions concern sacramental confession, and thus (according to Roman teaching) the eternal salvation or loss of souls. Surely we may conclude that (even apart from positive evils) Roman moral theology has no claim to pre-eminent certitude which may place it on a pedestal of superiority.

Selections from the Commentaries and Homilies of Origen, translated by Canon R. B. Tollinton, D.D. (S.P.C.K., 10s. net), is a book that will appeal to all who are interested in the study of the Fathers. The selection has been made with a view to giving the modern reader who has not time for a fuller study of the original an English version of such portions of Origen's extant expositions of Scripture as may enable him to understand Origen's point of view in regard to subjects which retain their interest for us in spite of changed conditions and the lapse of years. A useful essay on Origen as Exegete is prefixed.

Tales of India (Church Missionary Society, 1s.). This is a series of short, lively stories contributed by people who have lived in India. While they illustrate the work of the missionaries in schools, villages and hospitals, they will be appreciated just as much by those who know nothing of this special work for God in India. Stories of the tribes on the North-West Frontier are of topical interest at the present time, and “ Jimmy's Diary ” will appeal to all dog lovers. The book is well got up and illustrated with photographs taken on the spot, and is a capital gift-book for young people.